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Austria

Biotechnology

The Consumer is always right!

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Report Highlights:

During the visit of a distinguished USDA scientist to discuss Biotechnology the Austrian consumers raised a couple of interesting observations regarding Biotechnology and U.S. agricultural export policy in general. This message is only to pass along their comments and should in no way be interpreted as agreement with these observations.

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Vienna [AU1]
[AU]

Austrians critical of U.S. policies, and even those supportive of the United States, made the following comments during discussions on Biotechnology with a distinguished USDA scientist. The discussion group consisted of members of the American-Austrian Chamber of Commerce speaking candidly as consumers, not as representatives of their companies.

In regards to the WTO case on the EU Biotech approval moratorium:

- "Why is the United States trying to forcing us to eat food (biotech products) we don't want?"

- "U.S. marketers and PR people always insist that the consumer is always right. Well, we are consumers, but since we aren't Americans you want to force us to eat what you say is good for us. But, as Europeans we will choose what we eat." (This from a PR agent.)

Revealing how consumer perceptions change over time, one person stated:

"You tried to force us to eat your hormone contaminated beef. We resisted. Instead of providing us what we want you took the case to the WTO and in the end lost your market in Europe. Wouldn't it have been easier to just produce specialty meat for the EU market?"

After listening to their concerns, fears and complaints about U.S. Biotechnology a discussion ensued about how American consumers don't understand European consumers' concerns about biotechnology or hormone treated beef.

Explaining that the U.S. consumer confides in the food regulators because"

- Testing procedures are onerous prior to approving a product for sale in the United States,
- U.S. food regulators work independent of politics; no one tells them what to approve or not approve,
- when ever there is the possibility that the food may be unsafe it is immediately recalled at the expense of the private business. In addition,
- the United States' generous legal system provides ample rewards to anyone even slightly harmed or injured from unsafe foods. To date, no one has collected any money from a company because a Biotech food is unsafe or harms the environment.

With these explanations there seemed to be more of an understanding among the Austrian consumers present, and maybe (hesitate) acceptance of the U.S. position in regards to Biotechnology. It appears that this type of argument, at least in Austria and the Czech Republic provides some grudging acceptance of this technology.